JESUS THE TEACHER
MATTHEW 5:1-12

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Only rarely do you and I have the privilege of sitting at the feet of an unforgetable teacher. In the years I spent in formal education, and in the seminar and study experiences I have had since that time, I would guess that I have been taught by about 170 different teachers. And of those 170 just a very few remain in my mind and have a consciously contining effect on me. Now I learned something from all of them, even if it was negative. But a handful somehow managed to combine themselves, their own personality and style, with what they were trying to teach me so that today, years later, I still think, "Dr. Glick used to say that": or "that sounds like Mr.Hoffman".

Let me tell you about one of them. G. Wayne Glick had the unenviable task of teaching religion at a college where one year of religion was a required subject: and where weekly chapel attendance was a necessity. That made him a kind of natural opponent for most students who were interested in neither a course in religion nor attending Chapel. But, somehow, in spite of those handicaps Wayne Glick managed to be a very effective teacher. His freshman course in religion was discussed more in the dormitories late at night than any other. And his elective courses in Ethics, World Religions, and New Testament were quickly filled with Sociology, Political Science, Chemistry and Biology majors. Students used to read the newspaper, or their mail in Chapel: sometimes a little game of penney ante would develop over the pews in the back. But when Wayne Glick was preaching, students came to listen and to learn. He would come to the dorms in the evenings, find a bull session in progress: sit down on the floor, take off his shoes, light a cigar and wade right in. And it was that, more than anything else, that hooked me on the man and what he had to say.

I'm still learning from the man. For today, he has an 18 year old son on trial in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for alleged participation in the plot to kidnap Henry Kissinger. And he is going through that visible and particular agony of observing his son, who has taken absolutely seriously the Gospel

Wayne Glick taught and preached, pay a very dear price. And so he's still teaching me about things like courage and commitment and integrity.

Well, there are only a few of those in our life time. The superb, unforgetable teacher combines an enthusiastic knowledge of his subject, a thorough skill of teaching techniques, a true concern for his students as persons, and something else: something hard to define: something called Charisma - or electricity - or authority - or authenticity.

To read the New Testament objectively, honestly, and critically, is to discover a remarkable teacher. It's not, however, an easy discovery to make. For so much mythology, so many theological convictions, so many preconceived notions surround the man that it is, in fact, quite difficult to meet him as his contemporaries did - as a particularly and uniquely compelling teacher.

That is how he was known mostly. Not as Jesus the Christ - Jesus the Lord - Jesus the Savior: those are theological assertions that were added later: but as Jesus the teacher, the rabbi, the master - which is a translation of a Greek title meaning schoolmaster. No less than fifty times in the Gospel accounts Jesus is called teacher: even his opponents and adversaries conceded that to him. He was a teacher par excellence.

William Barday, in his work, The Mind of Christ, describes Jesus the teacher in terms of four categories, five teaching methods and three types of argument.

Because we are overly familiar with the man, and because we too have preconceived notions of what he said and what he was about, I think it is helpful to plow this ground again, in order to get the "feel" of this remarkable teacher.

His greatness may be seen in light of these four facts. First, he was obviously immediately anesting. There were plenty of rabbis, plenty of itinerant teachers: but where this man taught he gathered a crowd and they listened. He was a flexible teacher. He taught formally in the Synagog and Temple, but also in heavy scholarly debates on the street corner. He taught

as he walked with his friends: he used a fishing boat as a lectern on one occassion: he taught amidst great crowds, but in the initmate give and take of a fellowship of twelve disciples.

He was immediately intellegible. No one, apparently, walked away wondering what it was the man was trying tosay. And he was permanently memorable. There were no books or newspapers or magazines to record for posterity. But he got the job done in such a way that men could remember what he said, a way so effective that many of his sayings are part of our vocabulary 20 centuries later. For instance - "any man worth his salt" - "turn the other cheek" - "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak".

He did it by combining and using a rather amazing array of literary techniques, all the more ammazing for a man who could not have had much by way of formal education.

First the sharp epigram - the phrase that sticks in the mind. For instance: "What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?" Only literary genius coins a phrase like that. Someone did a study recently of how much a congregation retains of a Sunday sermon. The findings were shattering. By Sunday night, almost no one could remember a specific sentence. By mid week almost no one could remember a general idea. And by the following week, almost no one could remember the subject. Jesus was a master at turning a phrase with staying power.

Second, the thought provoking paradox; idea that sounds incredible - almost farcical - but that lurks in the mind because of the suspicion that it may, after all be true. For instance: "Blessed are the poor in spirit"? - "Happy are the peace makers"? 'Blessed are the persecuted"? Trouble is, we've heard them so often, they don't stun us anymore: where, in reality, if we could be absolutely objective our initial response to these rather outlandish suggestions would be - "You've got to be kidding!

Third, the vivid hyperbole: the literary equivalent of shock treatment: the didactic slap in the face. "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck

it out and throw it away".

Fourth, humor: irony: cynicism: tongue in cheek and sometimes slap stick comedy. He drew a picture, for instance, of a man with a board in his eye, trying to remove a speck of dust from another man's eye. the literary equivalent of a neuro-surgeon with palsy.

Fifth, his use of parables. Life magazine was started on the basis of the assumption that people would rather look at pictures than read. Twenty centuries before Jesus knew the trust of that, and created verbal pictures, - the point of which was so very clear that he didn't have to say anything further. The Prodigal Son. the Good Samaritan: the Lost Sheep.

Finally, in the intense environment of discussion with his opponents he was a master at making hispoint in a way that would put Perry Mason to shame, and of teachingat the same time. When confronted with that clear moral judgement involving the adultress about to be stoned: he was able to stop it and to make a point about man's condition by inviting anyone, without sin to throw the first one.

He was a master: a remarkable teacher. And he had that something extra - that authority or authenticity, or charisma if you will. To know him very well was to find him indistinquishable from what he taught. To know him very well was to sense that he was what he said: that he was the most vivid parable of all: that his own life was his best teaching illustration. It has been said, and correctly so, that there is nothing unique about Jesus' ethical teaching: that at best, he provided a synopsis and anthology of the highest ethical teaching, of the scribes, pharises and prophets. The difference is that he lived it: he became it. When he suggested that a man might find life by losing it: it wasn't a pompous pontification: he went out and did it. And it is good, for us today, to seem him in this light - as teacher.

We have been thinking about the technician: the master teacher. Mao Tse Tung is a master teacher: so was Adolf Hitler. And so it is irresponsible to talk about him as teacher without also thinking about the content of what

he taught. The obvious problem here is that men have spent a life time studying, thinking and writing about the teaching of Jesus. What he said infuses every sermon preached: every class taught: and we aren't about to get a very definitive job done in the time remaining this morning. What we can do, I think, is to construct two categories and see if we cannot establish an overview - a sense of direction - in each. Jesus' teaching canbe broken down into ethical instruction - what he said about man's moral behavior: and ideas about God - what he said that was new content, new revelation on the subject of the nature of the Almighty.

First, ethics. Jesus spent a lot of time talking about how men ought to behave in relation to each other: and in the process a whole new definition of what is right and good began to emerge. In the process of talking about people and their behavior Jesus questioned and turned around the very moral standards that regulated that behavior in the first place.

Like all men before them, and all men after them, the contemporaries of Jesus thought they knew what was right and good:and conversely, what was wrong and bad. We don't need to be critical of them for moral arrogance, because we are much the same. In fact, without some commonly agreed-upon set of ethical norms - corporate life connot exist for long. Jesus was, and always will be, at this point, the revolutionary teacher: the one who questions the very foundation stones of society: the one who in absolute and sometimes cruel honesty, holds up and examines the sacred moral cows of culture.

For the first century Jew, morality was clearly defined by the Holy Law: the 613 rules and the volumnes of interpretation and commentary on those rules. It was entirely possible, if one knew them all, to obey them all and the result was that a man could regard himself as morally perfect. It is at this point: this assumption that rightness can be accomplished by staying within the perimeters of a codified legal system that Jesus focused his attention. He had nothing against the law, per se. He was a Jew - and we

ought never to forget that. But what he taught was that moral goodness can never be accomplished as a result of not doing certain prohibited activities. And that was the revoluntionary position that threatened the whole massive structure of First Century Judias. That's why the scribes and priests and pharisees were afraid of him. Because the whole system had come to rest on this very dubious assumption about the definition of goodness.

Essentially, Jesus taught that morality was positive instead of negative. The law - beginning with the Ten Commandments - was essentially negative: all laws seem to be. Jesus taught that it wasn't enough: that it wasn't adequate to refrain from killing your neighbor, or stealing his cattle. True morality demands that you love him, even if you don't like him: that you stop by the road and minister to his wounds and pay his bills, even if he is one of a hated, minority group, the very sight of whom is revolting.

Jesus even went so far as to suggest that legally defined goodness could become badness: that is, when a man felt so good about himself that he became proud and vain. That really hurt, and that still hurts because institutional religion, in the name of this same Jesus has always played the same kind of game. Don't do this: don't do that: follow our rules - and your reward will be the ability to look down your pious nose at all those poor sinners out there. Jesus called that a form of walking death. He called the men who spouted it "white washed tombs".

Jesus made goodness a positive activity: but even that wasn't enough. Motivation was as important for him as external behavior. Generosity where done publically is suspect. Anger with another man. lust for another women - is as wrong as murder and adultery. It's almost amusing the way some people have been able to regard Jesus as a great moral teacher apart from the claims the church makes about him When a man told the great theologian Soren Kierkegaard that he could accept Jesus as teacher but not as Lord, Kiekegaard's answer was to invite the man to try living those teachings. He knew, and we know too - if we think about it - that it cannot be done alone. Envil Brunner said it

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well: "Jesus makes everyone of us a murderer and an adulterer".

And we move now from our objective observation of Jesus the teacher - to our convictions of faith about Jesus Christ our Lord. For if he is teacher alone - and if I take what he said very seriously, he very quickly becomes my accuser, my judge, my prosecution.

Jesus was more than a teacher of ethics. He taught about God: he revealed God: he was, we believe, God in the flesh. This is, and must be, as important as everything he taught. For the God Jesus Christ revealed to us is forgiving and merciful and loving. He is a God - more like a Father than a righteous judge. a God who understands when his children stumble and fall: a God who's forgiveness can pick a man up and recreate him and give him the kind of power he needs to live honestly in the ethical dilemnas of life.

That's why we can, with a straight face, call the content of his teaching Gospel. Good News. For Jesus - in the words of the fourth Gospel, "did not come to condemn the world - but to save it". He came, that is to say, not to pile guilt on your head and mine: not to make us feel so badly about ourselves that we become obsessed with our inadequacies. He came rather to show us a better way: a way to live and love that is positive and outgoing and helpful and essentially very happy. He came to show us a side of God men didn't know and men still have trouble handling: a God who is pleased with our humanity: a God whose love for us enables us to feel good about ourselves: a God whose incredible acceptance of us - compells us to keep trying to get up when we fall - to keep on imitating his remarkable teacher son: not because we're afraid of what will happen to us if we don't: but because his love for us is so great that we have no other option.

Jesus taught that. Jesus became that. Jesus the teacher died for that - in the most vivid visual aid you and I shall ever see. AMEN

Father, we would sit at the feet of the master. Give us the moral integrity to hear what he says. AMEN.